

The Pilgrim-Stranger & Government

1 Peter 2:13-14

Questions: What is God's purpose for authority?

How are Christians to respond to authority? Under what circumstances should a Christian disobey authority? Have you ever **had to** disobey authority?

Background and Context: The wicked emperor, Caesar Nero, had burned Rome and made Christians his scapegoats. The result was a wave of fierce persecution that had many followers of Christ questioning their faith. This passage in particular focuses on honorable living by believer in view of unbelievers who are watching for authentic change in the early believers then and us today.

Preface: He urges the believers to honor the persons who have been appointed to rule them. Peter asserts that Christians must submit to authority "for the Lord's sake." That is, the law of the land must be upheld as long as it does not force the Christian to disobey God's law (Acts 4:19; Acts 5:29).

Phillips: [Submission to civil authorities] is not a popular idea these days. Our generation marches, protests, demonstrates, and organizes mass campaigns of civil disobedience.

Nieboer: To submit is a very hard thing for a human to do, especially when things are not right. It is far easier to resist. ***The only one we are told to resist is the devil.***

Briscoe: We live in an antinomian [lawless] age in which people reject and resent authority. People are more concerned with individual freedoms and liberties than with being responsible members of society who acknowledge authorities. It is particularly important, therefore, that Christians maintain their special understanding of authority and show it in life-style and behavior. [p. 98, , *Understanding the Book of 1 Peter; Holy Living in a Hostile World*, ©1982, revised edition ©1993, Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, Ill.]

1. The Command to Submit

Remember, the early Christians were charged with plotting against the government.

"Submit yourselves" is a military expression literally meaning "to arrange in formation under the commander." "Submit" is a key word in this passage. The verb to submit and its forms appear six times in 1 Peter (2:13, 18; 3:1, 5, 22; 5:5). The word also means "to place under; to subordinate," and in this passage is a synonym of the verb obey.

Obedience is an important theme in the life of a Christian.

Although Peter and Paul both lived in the openly sinful, decadent Roman Empire—a society infamous for evil (homosexuality, infanticide, compulsory slavery, government corruption, abuse of women, immorality, violence), neither apostle offered any exemption by which believers were free to defy civil authority. Jesus Himself had commanded, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21).

Mac: Scripture nowhere condones such actions. On the contrary, the biblical command is simple—submit to civil authority, regardless of its nature. Even unreasonable, evil, harsh rulers and oppressive systems are far better than anarchy. And all forms of government, from dictatorships to democracies, are filled with evil because they are led by fallen sinners. Still, civil authority is from God, though the individual rulers may be godless.

II. The Extent of Submission

“To every ordinance of man.” If the Christians in Peter’s day had refused to obey Roman law, they would have given their opponents the necessary evidence to accuse them of lawlessness.

“Ordinance” *ISBE: In the New Testament, ordinance...means literally, “anything declared right”; “institution”. The term is used exclusively of the action of God. Peter implies that institutions, [though] apparently human, such as the family and the state, are of divine origin.*

III. The Motive to Submit

Kistemaker: Even though they desire freedom from Roman servitude and persecution, Peter admonishes his readers to obey civil authorities “for the Lord’s sake.” With this phrase he implies that God is sovereign in every area of life and in full control of every situation. Therefore, Peter encourages Christians to submit to instituted authority and to fulfill God’s purposes in the world.

Kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, dictators and despots rule by the grace of God.

Mac: Christ lived under the unjust and unrighteous rule of the Jewish and Roman authorities, yet He never opposed their right to rule. He denounced the sins of the Jewish leaders, but He never sought to overturn their authority. Likewise, Jesus never led demonstrations against Roman slavery and abuse of justice or engaged in any act of civil disobedience. He did not object even when those authorities unjustly tried Him and crucified Him. Instead of being preoccupied with political and social reform, Christ always focused on matters pertaining to His kingdom.

IV. The Scope of Submission

“To the king” Peter elaborates on the extent of believers’ submission by noting that it applies to all levels of authority. Breaking authority down to specific categories, he speaks of the highest level of the one in authority, the king.

Monarchy, or its parallel, dictatorship, is a form God uses in the world. It was especially a challenge for believers in Peter’s time to obey this part of the command because the king (Caesar) was a deranged tyrant, the Roman emperor Nero.

Peter wrote his epistle in the last few years of Emperor Nero’s wicked rule. Nero came to power around A.D. 54 at the age of seventeen and committed suicide fourteen years later. During the reign of this emperor, Peter himself met martyrdom outside Rome.

“As supreme” Yet the apostle tells the readers to submit themselves to the king [emperor], “as supreme”, as the “supreme authority.” The title *king* was often used for “Caesar” or “emperor” in the Mediterranean world of the first century (e.g., Luke 23:2; Acts 17:7).

“To governors” Governors is a term referring to a lower level of authority, officials under the king who might be sent by him. The New Testament lists the names of three governors of Judea: Pilate, Felix, and Festus. These three governors were appointed by the Roman emperor and were directly responsible to him.

Peter writes that the governors “are sent by him” and thus indicates that the emperor repeatedly commissioned governors.

Governors commissioned by the Roman *senate* served for a stated interval as “legates” or “proconsuls” (Cyrenius [Luke 2:2]; Sergius Paulus [Acts 13:7]; Gallio [Acts 18:12]).

Governors sent out by the emperor usually served in troublesome areas.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is a compelling role model of godly submission to the dictates of earthly authority. The New Testament introduces him as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost” [Acts 6:45]. He is an example of balance in his reverence to God and respect for human authority.

“Punishment...praise” The task of governors is “for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.”

The role of the governor, or magistrate, then, is to restrain evil, maintain law and order, and promote the welfare of the people.

Phillips: The early church, full of the Holy Spirit, did not see demonstrations, marches, subversions, and guerrilla warfare as options for righting wrongs. Peter did not advocate a massive slave revolt as a means of redressing the social evil of slavery. He did not organize marchers on Rome to put an end to the nightmare persecution of Christians. He did not call for an empire-wide strike to improve the lot of the poor. That was not the Holy Spirit’s way....Peter had seen the Lord Jesus in action. [Christ] led no revolts, stirred no carnal passions, and led no [political] crusades. He loved people, even His worst enemies, and He went about doing good.”

Briscoe: It is impossible to believe that God exists and not to believe in authority in principle.

So what?

How **really different** is your life? Do you blend in with the world or stand out from it? How would you evaluate yourself in the area of submission [to government? To law enforcement/code enforcement? To employer? To spouse?]
what does God want you to change in your attitude or behavior today?